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MEGACHURCHES: HIGH-IMPACT MINISTRIES

John N. Vaughan

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Critics of megachurches regularly provide what are considered to be the problems with these largest of congregations. A man once remarked in my presence, "The Lord must love the small churches because He made so many of them." Depending upon the city and region, you will find sixty to eighty percent of all U.S. churches to be plateaued or declining in membership and/or attendance.

Interestingly, both the percent of churches with 200 or less in attendance and that of non-growing churches averages about eighty percent of all U.S. churches. Are we to also assume that God intends for most of His churches to be small, plateaued, and/or declining in growth? This seems highly unlikely since the Great Commission missionary mandate of Matthew 28:19-20 has not been deleted from the Bible.

Hopefully, God loves all of His churches whether they be large or small. The frequent use, however, of the commands to "go" and "grow" in the Bible strongly suggests that He intends for lost sheep to be found and for His churches to increase in number proportionally. The issue is not small versus larger churches. The major issue remains biblical obedience, faith, and reproductive multiplication as believers.

20 Strengths of Megachurches

1. *Multiple-Ministries*

Cities are known for being home for groups of people with many varied social and cultural backgrounds. Smaller churches are usually expected to focus on ministries for people with a few specific needs or attempt to serve as a small staff of general practitioners to people representing several groups with many varied needs.

Large churches, like Lakewood Church of Houston, Texas, are able to provide many specialized ministries that include the Spanish-speaking community, the hearing impaired, senior citizens, inmates in jails and prisons, seamen, the homeless, assisting missionaries in 39 countries, distribution of tons of Gospel literature in 39 countries, tens of thousands of teaching tapes into 62 different countries, and weekly television programs that reach into 40 million homes.

Braeswood Assembly of God, also in Houston, discovered that 48 different countries were represented among its nearly 2,400 worshippers each week that speak 22 different languages. The large in-migration of Hispanics into the homes around the church's sanctuary led Braeswood Assembly to hire a full-time Hispanic pastor to minister to the non-English segment of the congregation.

Allen Temple Baptist Church of Oakland, California, leads a daily hi-rise tutorial program for an average enrollment of 80-100 elementary and secondary school students. Other ministries include several food programs and assistance to needy families with housing and utility bills. Through the Health Education Committee the church cooperates with Shiloh Christian Fellowship in conducting annual neighborhood health fairs which provide free health screenings by doctors, nurses, and community health agencies. The AIDS Ministry Task Force provides information, education, and help for people living with AIDS.

Numerous other megachurches, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and independent congregations, like Capital Christian Center, Sacramento, California, provide ministries on a large scale to hurting people. This Assembly of God congregation includes under the umbrella known as "Target Ministries" like Bread of Life, targeted to men and women suffering from compulsive overeating, anorexia, or bulimia. The Pure Life/Men ministry is targeted to men who are in bondage to pornography, homosexuality, and other sexual addictions. The New Wine ministry is designed for men and women addicted to drugs and alcohol. This list presents in miniature a much larger list of multitudes of ministries offered in Jesus' name by megachurches.

2. High Visibility Location

As a researcher who personally visits up to 200 churches annually, this writer frequently discovers almost unknown megachurches in hard to find places. However, many of these strategic churches eventually either relocate near or directly on major avenues and/or interstate exit interchanges. These easy to identify and reach locations place these churches within minutes of most areas of their city. Tens of thousands of unchurched people are aware of their location.

Examples of highly visible sanctuaries include Lake Avenue Congregational Church of Pasadena, California; New Hope Community Church of Portland, Oregon; Capital Christian Center of Sacramento, California; North Phoenix Baptist Church of Phoenix, Arizona; First Baptist Church of Orlando, Florida; First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas; and Riverside Baptist Church of Denver, Colorado.

3. Specialized Staff

The structure and type of church staff varies significantly between denominational and affiliation groups. These same type differences also vary as churches grow larger.

One of the best measures of these differences is the National Church Staff Salary Survey published every two years by the National Association of Church

Business Administration.¹ This report analyzes salaries of more than twenty-five church staff positions within more than thirty denominational categories geographically by region of the nation, size of annual budget, and average size of Sunday morning worship attendance.

Churches reporting average *worship attendance up to 200* people usually indicate having one to eight of these more than twenty-five staff positions. While Churches of Christ, for example, tend to have only a Senior Minister at this size, Pentecostal churches have also added one Associate. Lutherans and Nazarenes tend to have three of the positions; Baptists report having four to eight of the various positions; Presbyterians have six; and Methodists report having eight of the positions in mixed assortments. The pattern varies widely between different regions of the nation. The most common salaried staff positions for churches this size include: Pastor, Associate, Secretary, Executive Secretary, Business Administrator, Minister of Music, Organist/Pianist, Minister of Christian Education, Youth, Maintenance and Custodian.

The churches of *201-400 worship attendance* compliment this above staff positions with Administrative Assistant, Finance Secretary, Maintenance Supervisor, Dietician/Hostess, Minister of Children and/or Preschool, Evangelism, Adults, Young Adults, and Senior Adults.

At the *401-800 worship attendance* level many of the same staff positions hired by churches at the 201-400 size are still employed. One major difference, however, is a much higher percentage of the 401-800 size churches reporting having these salaried ministry positions.

This pattern of churches expanding the variety of ministries through additional staff is further noticed once a church's average worship attendance reaches *801-1400 people and larger*. It is common for megachurches with attendance of 2,000 or more people to provide associates to almost every category of ministry staff.

Several have added new categories of staff like Executive Pastor (this is not the same person as the Senior Pastor), Minister of Church Growth, Minister of Assimilation, Minister of Prayer, Minister of Media, and even Research Associates to assist the Senior Pastor in gathering specialized information he requests for writing and sermon preparation. A Senior Pastor who has more than fifty staff members may have an Administrative Assistant, and one or more secretaries responsible for his immediate office needs.

¹ Michael J. Springer and Marvin Meyers, 1992 National Church Staff Salary Survey (Ft. Worth: National Association of Church Business Administration: 1992). Published every two years and available from the National Association of Church Business Administration, 7001 Grapevine Hwy, Suite 324, Ft. Worth, TX 76118-5103. Telephone: (817) 284-1732.

4. Name Recognition of the Church

In a city like Chicago with at least 1,100 churches or Boston with nearly 400 churches, even people who are active members in a church have difficulty knowing even one-fourth of the churches other than their own. Unchurched people in almost any size city, even the smallest cities, are almost totally unaware of a church's name or affiliation unless it is large, is on radio or television, is known for a special ministry that interests them personally, or has a pastor popularly known in the city. Megachurches are able with greater regularity and intensity to saturate a population with their names and messages through electronic and print media. They also have many more members mixing with the general population at any given hour than smaller churches.

Data gathered at the Church Growth Research Center at Southwest Baptist University in Missouri, for example, indicates that the churches with an average worship attendance of at least 1,000 people are consistently among the fastest growing churches in the nation. These churches tend to be churches that regularly saturate their cities through direct mail, door to door visitation, and telemarketing methods.

5. Pastor Is a Proven Leader, Preacher, and Teacher

Many new seminary graduates are surprised to learn that serving the first church, usually a small church, is different from previous expectations.

The pastor of the smaller church is expected to be a one-person staff capable of being a spiritual general practitioner. As a church grows larger and additional staff members are added, a church usually involves a larger base of leaders and begins to use long-range planning strategies.

All of these elements allows each staff member, but especially the senior pastor, to excel in the ability to lead the church to dream dreams and to re-evaluate and redefine purpose and direction, through well planned teaching, preaching, and leadership. His role and abilities become increasingly clearer as one of team-builder. He becomes the shepherd of his staff and key lay-leaders who when equipped actually serve as shepherds of the congregation. The congregation allows him to become the church's preacher and leader who equips key leaders, both staff and lay-leaders, to actually minister through the congregation.

6. Many Neighborhoods Are Represented

While most smaller churches tend to represent at most two or three neighborhoods, megachurches are most often regional churches.

First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, for example, has a Sunday worship attendance approaching 10,000 people. The church plans to build a new 9,200 capacity worship center. Founded in the year 1846, the church currently

owns eleven blocks in downtown Jacksonville. This Southern Baptist congregation in recent years decided to organize its Sunday school classes by zip code areas.

Much like the Yoido Full Gospel Church of Seoul, Korea, this new structure allowed First Baptist Church to organize itself for more effective evangelistic outreach, member follow-up, and neighborhood fellowships. The church has increased in average weekly Sunday morning worship attendance from 6,000 people in 1981-82 to 7,900 in 1991.

Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas, has recently been listed as the fastest growing church in North America with an average increase in worship attendance of nearly 3,000 people in a one year period. This congregation penetrates and ministers to both members and non-members through regularly scheduled "zip code fellowships."

7. Social and Community Stability

Every community is constantly experiencing change. People are moving in and people are moving out due to job transfers and other reasons.

Some communities are much more mobile than others. Dr. T.T. Crabtree, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Springfield, Missouri, shared that some of the children in the elementary school nearest their church site had changed schools as many as five times in one year. Because people attending megachurches come from many communities and form a unique community themselves, they are able to maintain a sense of continuity and community identity even when radical changes are taking place in the neighborhood they call home. As mentioned elsewhere in this book, the Germantown Baptist Church in metro Memphis, Tennessee, joined other strong church groups and formed a group called "Urban Allies" to aid churches in radically changing communities of their city.

8. Openness to Innovative Ideas

Since megachurches are able to attract people from many geographical and interest communities of their cities, this also invites opportunity for variety in creative resources. The great challenge of the large church is usually finding ways to utilize creative leaders rather than having to worry about a shortage of leaders.

The homogeneous groups within a larger heterogeneous congregation allow a larger forum and openness to new and bold ideas for reaching a city. Usually, the pastor and staff members of such churches have been selected by the congregation because of their previous evidence of success in openness to ideas from others.

9. Reduced Exposure to Internal Conflict

The pastor of a small church has fewer emotional shock absorbers when conflict is encountered than can be found in the multiple-staff church. As mentioned elsewhere in these pages, staff stability tends to increase as a church grows larger. Shared staff responsibility, adequate salaries, clear job descriptions and expectations, and opportunity to specialize in select areas of ministry reinforce the potential for greater harmony in church life.

10. Expanded Opportunity for Service

Large churches frequently offer ministry opportunity in as many as a hundred areas. Churches like Alamo City Baptist Church of San Antonio, Texas, and First Baptist Church of Springdale, Arkansas, ask new members of their congregations to complete spiritual gift inventories. Results of the inventory are then matched with ministry opportunities available within the congregation.

Ministry opportunities are often available at almost any hour of the day or night. Volunteers are activated in preparation of mail-outs, repair of widow's disabled cars, assisting as counselors, radio and television technical assistance, tutoring, free medical care, and multitudes of highly specialized skill areas.

11. Excellence of Music

Few sounds touch the heart as powerfully as that of human voices in congregational singing in churches. The mere awe of 2,000 or 10,000 Christians singing together generates a sense of conquest.

Megachurches are known in all major cities for their dynamic seasonal concerts. First Assembly of God in Phoenix, Arizona, is a pioneer in its grand Fourth of July concert; Crystal Cathedral Congregation of Garden Grove, California, is known nationally for its flying angels and live camels each Christmas; First Baptist Church of Orlando, Florida, has filled its 5,000 seat sanctuary with two giant singing Christmas tree concerts; and Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas, is known for its legendary 400 seat choir loft.

Orchestras composed of members from the local congregation are now a frequent sight in the largest churches. Some churches, like Eastwood Baptist Church, Marietta, Georgia, have organized both an adult and youth orchestra who serve in different worship services. Nationally known soloists who receive more invitations than they can possibly accept, hesitate to accept invitations for area concerts unless they can be guaranteed attendance. Churches with thousands in attendance each week can usually meet that need and invite smaller churches of the city to benefit from what would otherwise be an impossible dream.

12. Media Saturation of the Immediate Metro Area

While radio can be expensive for most churches, television would be absolutely unthinkable. Homebound members with serious problems, multitudes who view worship services from hospital beds, aged viewers from nursing homes, prison inmates, unchurched spouses who remain home while their families attend church, and many more can be touched through electronic mass media.

13. Media Saturation into Other Cities, States, and Countries

Previously unknown churches become household names due to national radio and television access. A mobile society like ours benefits when Christian families are moved by employers from one city to another almost overnight. Through media, a church in that distant city is able to reassure a family that God's people are already present in significant strength.

Media provides immediate access for the small church pastor to his peers in much larger churches who may nurture his own knowledge of the Scriptures. Radio and television create regional, national, and international networks of ministry that provide distinctively Christian news and other information common to the greater Christian community of churches. Government opposition to the Christian message and organized worship, immediate eye-witness coverage of social conflict involving Christians at an abortion clinic, or a Billy Graham Crusade in Hong Kong are brought directly into our homes, offices, and churches. Many megachurches are able to broadcast by satellite directly from their sanctuaries to homes in all fifty states.

14. Organizational and Group Homogeneity

As a church grows larger the age span between age groups becomes narrower. This allows a natural transition for flow of members from one age group to the next. Within the smaller church this alternative is not available and results in potential annual organizational conflict.

The large church, though by nature a very heterogeneous organization, is able to provide a multitude of common interest ministry action groups. Since most megachurches are administered through delegated authority to staff and lay-leaders, it is common for a megachurch pastor to be unable to name all the ministries active within his congregation. His leaders, however, are well aware of the ministries, their health, activities, and who is involved in them. These groupings are the nerve center for reproductive organizational life with the various ministries of the large church.

15. Kingdom Focus Versus Dominance by Local Culture

Most churches are able to reach beyond their local communities with the Gospel through cooperative efforts with other churches. Few, however, are able

to penetrate distant communities, cities, and nations with their own human and financial resources alone. This limitation of resources tends to keep the local congregation bound by the culture of its own members and community. This is both a strength and limitation.

A megachurch, meanwhile, with significant resources is able to function more effectively than many smaller denominations. Even though these churches may be large contributors to their own denominations, these churches may be perceived as a threat to the denomination. Mere awareness of this capability allows most megachurches to develop and employ a world-view that allows penetration of the immediate community while also sharpening Kingdom focus to evangelize entire cities. These cities may include their own and others.

Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas, has single-handedly initiated the establishment of large Baptist congregations in Latin America. This has been accomplished while also being a regular contributor to the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Other megachurches can share similar accounts.

16. Financial Resources

Contrary to popular opinion, many megachurches are not wealthy. Also contrary to general opinion, many megachurches do not maintain huge bank reserves. Admittedly, there are exceptions.

Per capita income even for megachurches can average as little as fifteen dollars. First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, is the largest Christian congregation in the nation. The church averages approximately 20,000 people each week, accounting for low and high attendance seasons. Vast amounts of human and financial resources are spent annually to reach the greater Chicago population for Jesus Christ. Funds usually are expended as quickly as they are received. This practice is considered by the church to be a matter of good stewardship.

Large churches, however, are full of people who can share stories of small church conflicts resulting from bank account reserves untouched for several years and in some cases for decades. Multitudes of small churches, however, also know the principle of allowing God to give through you as well to you.

17. Potential for Influencing Change in Cities

While major newspapers continue to report conflicts between zoning conflicts between rapidly growing churches and municipal zoning boards, megachurches remain as powerful agents for social and moral change. When one major city in the Southwest attempted to curb the growth of ethnic storefront churches through parking restrictions, the megachurches of that city were able to offer vocal and legal support to the smaller congregations.

City governments have few organizations that share the concerns of the city leaders and who are able to mobilize an army of supporters to oppose drug related crimes, abortion, poverty, joblessness, marital and family problems, racial unrest, and even community apathy. When megachurch pastors and their congregations speak about community problems they are seldom ignored. Make no mistake, megachurches serve a key role in encouraging all churches within a city to be alert and bold in sharing the living Christ with the hurting and broken lives of the city its ever-changing communities.

18. Major Interpreters of Urban Spiritual Warfare

Neighborhood gang members in Kansas City, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Miami, are aware of the spiritual leaders in their communities. Power groups know that it is best to keep a respectable distance from worship centers where the power of God is obviously present. Even militant groups within a community know that pain and death are real. They know enough about hell on earth that it seems reasonable to assume the reality of an eternal hell as just payment for those they oppose in the streets.

Even non-believer expect Christians to be the voices for God in opposition to darkness in the city. Christians are awakened when even a mosque or synagogue is burned or damaged by acts of violence. The enemies of the churches act foolishly when they act recklessly against God's people. Megachurches care for the welfare and health of smaller churches far more than these churches may ever know.

19. Strong Centers of Support for Christian Values

Churches of all types and sizes are regularly ignored and then mocked by major news media. Interestingly, the same treatment is seldom directed toward other religious groups. In a culture where the church can be its own worst enemy due to low esteem and trust of one another, we must be continually reminded that our mandate is to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. While our culture offers success and comfort, it is also capable of robbing the churches of vitality and urgency of mission.

The Anglo, Hispanic, and Black ethnic population of Houston, Texas, is reproduced in the membership of Lakewood Church. The motto of the church, "Oasis of Love," can be found on the church's printed materials and over all entrances to the sanctuary. In the same way, the church is to be the center where unchurched non-Christian strangers, friends, and relatives can attend and bring those they love with a sure awareness that God still heals broken hearts, broken hopes, and broken homes today. The power of the changed life through Jesus Christ is central to most megachurches that reaffirm the Bible through the

pulpit, Bible classes, seminars, concerts, media evangelism, Christian schools, and a multitude of other ministries that affirm Christian values.

20. Umbrella for Weak Churches Ready to Disband

One of the greatest challenges for megachurches in the next generation will be learning how to strengthen weaker churches in urban centers without attracting their strongest leaders. Three churches that have excelled in meeting this need during the last half of the twentieth century have been Highland Park Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tennessee; First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas; and First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas. The Dallas congregation, for example, maintains a network of nearly thirty satellite chapels through which most of its benevolence resources are shared with the inner city. For almost a century this church has had almost a third of its congregation ministering through satellite locations. First Baptist Church of Houston maintains a helping relationship to more than thirty struggling churches of inner city Houston. Megachurches are uniquely able to provide resources that are usually in decline in urban centers of the nation.